



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2003

Writing Sample

Gábor T. Szántó

Includes "Letters to King Laios, from Oedipus," "The tenth man," "The Endgame," "The Funeral," "Jam," and "Being a (Hungarian-) Jewish Writer The Anatomy of a Paradox."

Rights

Copyright © 2003 Gábor T. Szántó

Recommended Citation

Szántó, Gábor T., "Writing Sample" (2003). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 82.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/82

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Gábor T. Szántó

A poem, three stories and an essay

*

Letters to King Laios, from Oedipus

I.

My Dear Father!

I've completed the calculations, and you've lost.
I spent sixthousand-fivehundred and seventysix hours inside my mother.
Between you and me, you could really admit your defeat.
In any case, this is more than your share of her body.
According to my calculations, if you were allowed entry
into her thrice a week, for a lusty hour's worth,
you would have had to spend a total of twothousand-onehundred-and sixty weeks,
to equal my share, which was spent in a continuous manner.
That's fully worth fortyone-and a half years.
Admit it: desire surely weakens, wreck and withers away over so many years.
My desire however, remained during those nine months, and remains still.
Refute me, if you can! I await your answer, what's next, old man?

P.S.:

And just to make sure, you know: I also ate from her body.

**From the Library of Alexandria.*

Translated by Peter Mandl with the author

*

The tenth man

It is my last day in town. Although I have never lived here, still each acquaintance tells me that I have come home, for they consider me to be a local, by way of my ancestors. And I, although I could never live here, always feel the same thrill on arriving here to spend a few days, although the relatives are gone. I always visit the same places, yet I still make the pilgrimage, for the experience of being here is bottled inside me and lasts until the next visit.

This is my last day here, and I set out for the synagogue. It has been many years since I saw the inside; the aging building has been closed to visitors while being restored. Even the small prayer room has proved too large for the surviving congregation.

As I pass the rusted, crumbling fence it occurs to me that I might not even find the prayer house open. I have come here before only to find it closed, but today it would disappoint me if I could not go inside. Word had it in town that nowadays they open the building for tourists, warning them to be careful.

I enter the gate, take the yarmulke out of my pocket, and place it on my head. Synagogue and cemetery are the only two places where I wear it--places where I feel the potential presence of transcendence, places where the neverpresent is, as it were, present.

Mr. Klein, the aged cantor, sits at a small table in the antechamber and nods his behatted head in response to my greeting.

"Don't you recognize me?" I ask.

He squints at me, not wanting to give a neutral reply, but he obviously has no idea where to place me.

"My great-grandmother died at the age of one hundred and one, here at the old-age home." I try to point, past the wall, at the other side of the street. "You know, Dédi," I persist. "You must remember her!"

He leans closer to me, and seeing his hearing aid now I almost conclude that I did not get through, but he answers me:

"I know who you are! Welcome! Are you here with your parents?" he asks, and hope for the event glints in his eyes.

"No, I am alone," I say, and realize that this town, with the passing of the ancestors and the departure of the living, is a symbol of broken roots for him, while for me it means a return to my roots.

Other visitors arrive and ask if they may enter.

Mr. Klein tears tickets from a book, hands them over, takes the money, and they go inside.

"I'd like to go inside also, I haven't seen it in a long time," I say.

"Go ahead, son," replies the old man.

I offer to pay, but he refuses to accept money from me.

At last, after I insist, he tears off a ticket and puts away the money.

Mosaics cover the floor of the passage between the pews leading toward the locked-away Torah scrolls. At the sides there are colorful stained glass windows; here and there the paint is peeling. The young couple in front of the Ark are looking at the table on which stands the upraised finger of a Torah pointer. The smallest movement sends dull echoes reverberating in the thick silence of the empty room. The strangers are pondering the meaning of the Hebrew inscriptions and the possible function of the silver hand.

I glance at the man's uncovered head. I can never get used to that. Nothing covers his head and Mr. Klein did not request him to cover it. I would never enter his church with my hat on. Not because I am not religious, but because it might offend his sensibilities. Yes, possibly it might do that. Now I just gulp, without saying anything. Perhaps he does not even realize that in here the custom is different. I don't want to put him in an embarrassing situation, so I walk past them.

I sigh, and the building roars with emptiness. I am all alone now, walking between the pews. Suddenly I feel that I should be praying, to make everything here come alive, these walls, these rows of pews, the words hiding under the Torah covers, the letters of the Law. But I do not actually believe in this, I am merely under the spell of the spirit of the place.

Overwhelmed, I walk back toward the antechamber, looking at the thousands of lines of writing covering the wall, a host of names, those of the murdered, and I notice the symbolic coffin, which I did not remember being there. The Old Man's eyes are on me as I come over to say good-bye.

"How did you like it?" he asks.

"It's beautiful." I utter the word with difficulty.

Somehow the word is not right for this place. Mr. Klein's hand reaches out and grasps mine, unwilling to release me.

"I will sing something for you!" he offers, not wanting to let me go.

We step inside and he takes a deep breath; a powerful voice bursts forth from his throat. The struggle of the solitary chant against the acoustics of the orphaned temple is uncanny. The voice expands to fill the temple; the cantor's face is immovable.

If there "exists" an eternal God, He surely must be listening to this! The cantor's voice contains all that has happened to his people over the past millennia. I suddenly panic, fearing that he is going to be ill. Now his voice practically rattles in his throat. Where could this voice be coming from, anyway?

After finishing the chant, he remains silent for a moment. Then he begins to pant. On the way out he is still struggling for breath but gives me a questioning look. He knows that he has me under his spell.

"Son," he takes me by the arm, "are you free this evening?"

He rushes on without giving me a chance to ask why he wants to know.

"We need you for prayer. We need a tenth man."

I must have nodded, for he continues in a calmer manner.

"For years now we can barely get together a minyan, we are unable to pray."

I recall that already years ago they were forced to take my great-grandmother to the prayer hall; they were substituting women for the missing men. In order to be able to pray to Him, they pulled a fast one right in front of the Almighty's eyes.

"Do come," he practically implores me, "give us a hand!"

A tingling runs from the nape of my neck down the length of my spine, and I feel dizzy. I hang my head. The Old Man's expression seems calmer now that he believes I have nodded in assent. I know that I won't be there tonight.

"We'll be expecting you!" says the cantor in parting and places his hand on my shoulder.

"I'll be there," I say aloud, whereas I know that my train leaves in the afternoon.

I do not have the heart to tell the Old Man, I cannot take away the hope that will perhaps sustain him till the evening. I have no right to tell him the truth, to make him despair. The handful of men assembling here for prayer this evening will believe that the tenth man is on the way since Mr. Klein promised them that a guest would be here to complete the minyan. I cannot deprive him, and them, of that hope.

As I exit the synagogue I tremble with the emotion caused by the sorrowful chant and the Old Man's glance, his humble, practically imploring request. My only solace is that the cantor is going to be at peace until eveningtime.

The gate slams behind me; I don't look back, and I try to forget that imploring face while knowing that for that very reason it will remain etched into my memory, perhaps forever.

On the sidewalk across the street a mother is walking with her little daughter, who stares at me and asks her mother, pointing at me:

"What's that on the man's head?"

The mother turns toward me; I look away but still see that she takes her child by the hand and yanks her away, then bends down to her and whispers something in her ear.

I leave the yarmulke on my head as long as they can see me, and after turning the corner I snatch it off my head and angrily shove it into my pocket.

Translated by John Bátki



The Endgame

"It's *zman*, what's everyone standing around for?" Krausz, the cantor, was indignant. "Come and do your dovening, then everyone can have dinner."

"What's this *am hooretz* grumbling about again? Just once, I'd like to know what's the hurry. He doesn't have a cat or a dog waiting for him, and anyway, he always gets to eat his dinner before we do. He wheedles it out of the kitchen staff every time before we say our prayers."

Löffler, the leader of the community, expostulated to old Uncle Sámuel as if the latter were able to hear anything. Whereas he knew all too well that the old man turned up the volume of his hearing aid only at night, after they all sat down in the parlor to watch the news on TV. In his lighter moments he kidded old Sámuel that he should only bother to turn it up every other day -- on inbetween days, he should sharpen his ears in his own room. As long as he needed the other man, he didn't have to think of his own troubles, such as: no matter how much he rubbed the thick lenses of his eyeglasses, he could still only see hazy blotches on the TV screen. He found it most disturbing that "during the game the announcers said less and less, nothing like the radio, in the old days," so that at times moments went by without his knowing what was happening on the playing field.

Since Krausz was both cantor, leader of the prayers, and, as needed, *meshgiach*, supervisor of -- no one else could have filled all these functions, he held the "senior rank" -- there was no one else to appeal to when he decreed it was time for prayers.

So they groped their way in the dark staircase of the charity old-age home toward the tiny shul upstairs, where, if all of the residents showed up, the space was filled with what, after all, seemed like an air of well-being. A few of them were already waiting in the unheated hall.

Krausz made a wry mouth. He did not live at the charity house and wanted to get home in time for the early evening mystery show he had marked in the TV program some time ago. Now he was trying to calculate his chances of making the bus that left at a quarter of, to be at home on the hour, and sink into his easy chair facing the TV set.

"We'll wait until the others come. If they don't show, we won't pray." His announcement was forceful. The threat, intended as a reproach aimed at the absent ones, was actually heard only by the guiltless ones in attendance, who already knew that there was no other way out. Beside himself, Löffler and old Sámuel, there was Mr Szerb the former jeweler, Berger the glazier, Szegedi who had once been the director of an orphanage and Altmann the shames. The women sat in the back; the cantor, it goes without saying, paid no attention to them.

"I tell you," Berger whispered to Löffler. "This azesz, this bigmouth was supposedly the leader of prayers for Ruv Koppel Reich himself."

"Ah, but that was more than fifty years ago. Probably even he himself has forgotten about it by now," said Löffler, with a flick of his wrist. These few sentences were by now a nightly recurring refrain at the time of evening services. Mentioning this unverifiable legend formed part of a regular ritual, whenever Krausz's grumbling became unbearable.

Mr Molnár now arrived, wheezing, and dropped into his customary seat, among the women in the last row: his was the chair closest to the door.

"Do you want a *Siddur*?" The shames inquired with a transfigured smile, eager to be of service. At the gesture of refusal the sexton, who was a bit touched in the head, sidled back toward the Torah reading desk. This scene, too, was a bit of regular daily

theatrics. Mr Molnár did not know how to pray, but ever since his spouse got to be the leader -- yes, that's the right expression, since no one seemed to recall just how -- of the Women's Group, fourteen members, all widows save for her; well, ever since then, Mr Molnár had to sit in attendance every morning and night, there in that last row. "Another soul back in the fold of Israel." Wagging tongues had it that this was the price of the wife's position. So Mr Molnár sat in his place, he dared not move closer to the Ark of the Covenant, nor was he invited to; he did not touch the prayerbook since he could not read Hebrew -- so that he was merely a body in presence. But the others, appreciating this, treated him almost as an equal and nodded in greeting upon his arrival.

Szegedi winked at Krausz, urging him to begin the minchah, but, uncertain that this was noticed, he also made small waving motions with his hand. Krausz misunderstood this and came over to him.

"It's time, time!" said Szegedi, pointing at his watch. "You won't get home in time for the game," he said, leaning closer to Krausz, as if he meant to whisper this, although his hoarse voice was clearly audible throughout the room. The cantor waved him off with an exasperated gesture and shambled back where he came from. Then it was his turn to wave and send questioning looks toward Berger and the others, but they merely shrugged instead of urging him to start the afternoon prayers... So the cantor just resigned himself to missing his TV show, and acknowledged that they would not be able to start in time; in fact, he began to wonder if the prayers would be said at all this evening. He tried to make a mental headcount of the people they had to wait for, the ones that could still be expected to come.

Andor Bíró now entered the room and this made Krausz lose track of the numbers; he had to start counting anew. Before he was halfway through, Bíró placed a hand on his arm.

"Forget about the count. Old Schweiger won't be able to come."

"Then let's wait a little while longer," Krausz mumbled, acquiescing.

"But without him there won't be enough, I tell you," said Bíró, tugging at Krausz's jacket, and leaning quite close to whisper in his ear, "he's not well at all."

The cantor kept blinking, unable to come up with a ready response. He did not notice how everyone fell silent, and was tensely listening to this faltering dialogue.

"Well then, we don't have a minyan. Everyone will have to pray alone. There won't be common prayer."

Krausz's resigned sentences were clearly heard by everyone, even old man Sámuel had understood each word. This kind of thing had occurred before at the charity home; not infrequently more than one person was indisposed, and at such times, after briefly milling around, they would scatter, each to his or her own room on the ground floor. Beside the residents, only an occasional visitor from abroad turned up to reinforce the flock, from time to time. So that there was nothing unusual in this by now commonplace failure of numbers, but still, this time they all sensed that Andor Bíró had not yet reached the end of his say, that he still had something else, something even weightier to impart, but has not found the appropriate way to state it. Little by little everyone gathered around him, and, along with the women, even Molnár sidled over. There they all stood, pressed close together, their eyes hanging on Andor Bíró.

"He is so weak that he can't come up the stairs. That's what the doctor said, too -- otherwise there's nothing else wrong. He has no pains, he's fully conscious, but he lies there without moving. He has only one problem," said Andor Bíró, raising his voice here, and by now everyone was impatiently fidgeting. "One problem only --" and here he paused once more, as if still unsure whether he could say it.

"Spit it out, quit stalling!" snapped Mr Szerb, and the others voiced their agreement.

"Well, in a word, he wants to recite the kaddish for the dead," Andor Bíró concluded, with a deep sigh. Having said this, he was visibly relieved.

Krausz and Löffler were both lost in thought for a moment. The same thing set them thinking: they both tried to recall how did the prayers take place on recent occasions -- was old Schweiger present, and if not, what did they do, who substituted for him? The days, mornings and nights all coalesced; they searched the cells of their memories in vain, the sought-for image did not flash forth from the dimness.

Their ruminations were disrupted by a firm voice.

"If he can't come upstairs, then we'll go down to him. Isn't that so?" Szegedi expected to be seconded immediately; he felt that his moment had at last arrived, surely the majority would join his initiative and thus place him briefly in a key role.

"Yes, we're going, of course we're going, Mr Director," said Berger in a soothing tone, and Szegedi could not decide whether he had indeed said the right thing at the right time, or that the other's voice contained a hidden note of irony. In his confusion he cast a look of appeal toward Löffler, who, still oppressed by the lapse of memory, was nervously wiping his eyeglasses with his handkerchief, instead of noticing this look that demanded an answer.

"All right, let's get going," said Krausz, gently shoving those crowding around him toward the door. "What's there to think about?" he asked and, to set an example, briskly strode toward the exit. The others shambled in his wake, groping for the banister on their way down the dark stairs until someone at last punched the light switch.

Most of them were already milling around in front of the entrance to the dining room on the ground floor, when the sounds of a heated argument filtered down from the landing, followed by the appearance of Altmann who made such a strange face that Krausz involuntarily laughed out. The shames cleared his throat once or twice in his embarrassment, stepped close to the cantor and whispered something in his ear.

"*Bist du meshügge?*" Krausz shouted, vehemently waving his hand around his temples, adding further emphasis to his shocked tone.

"*Holile*, dear Chief Cantor, my good sir, I didn't say that! I was just reporting what he said." Altmann was an old piece of furniture here, he did not take the remark to heart; he did feel hurt, however, by the contents of his report being imputed to him.

Now the rest of the group arrived, with agitated faces, and still wheezing from the stairs. The women, all in a bunch, were whispering to each other, while Andor Bíró was desperately trying to explain something.

"I already wanted to say something upstairs, but you all started to come down here. And anyway, I was only delivering a message. It wasn't my idea."

"What the heck is going on here?" Löffler lashed out, blinking in turn at Krausz, Altmann and Bíró. "Would anyone care to explain to me?"

Permeated by a sense of his responsibility, Andor Bíró again took command of himself, and pronounced each word distinctly:

"He wants to recite the kaddish *for him with him*."

"What's he saying?" Löffler nudged old Sámuel, to make sure he heard it right, but old Sámuel, in his great hurry, had turned down his hearing aid in the stairway, and had not yet managed to turn up the volume amidst the mounting excitement, although for a change he was exceptionally interested in hearing what this hurly-burly was all about. For this reason -- so that he would not slow down the momentum of events around him -- instead of indicating that he had not heard a single word that was said, he merely spread out both arms. The others were all arguing and interrupting each other, and the women mingled among the men.

The tumult resulted in the coming forth of the kitchen staff, but Krausz managed to dissuade them from taking sides. They, in the course of years of service here, had acquired a kind of expertise in certain lesser matters, but if anything, they learned to stay out of disputes not related to dietary rituals. Indeed, the residents would have considered anything beyond that as interfering, and cause for taking offense. So the kitchen staff watched the unfolding events with interest while trying to remain out of sight; only the young kitchen girl risked asking the question, after seeing that no one entered the dining hall:

"And what about dinner? The tables are set." Of course she had no way of knowing that a debate such as this pushed everything else into the background, and that the same people who on other days would be idling in front of the kitchen door long before mealtime, now, in the heat of events, totally forgot that they could already have been eating.

"C'mon, don't be absurd! Dinner is out of the question at a time like this!" It was Szegedi protesting, and again he had the advantage of good timing, for he was voicing the overwhelming majority's opinion.

Mr Szerb started to speak in a low but firm tone, and this unexpected turn of events made everyone fall silent.

"Someone else should try to talk to him. So that he'll understand that we cannot fulfill his request. We've had minyan problems before, and for a little money we got people to help us out. Let's set his mind at ease, we'll manage somehow this time, too."

"The matter isn't all that simple." It was the cantor, standing behind him, who mumbled these words, as if talking to himself. "Those who used to come over for months, blessed be their memory, are unable to do so any more. We no longer have that kind of help, it's over. We just hadn't noticed it because we have been mobilizing every last person, somehow we always had one or two *balbosim*, householders, drop by, so that we managed to eke out a minyan. Somehow..." he repeated, blinking, shaking his head, his expression becoming solemn.

"All right, so we'll write a letter, and find a *kileh* where they'll recite the kaddish for old Schweiger," the former jeweler insisted, but soon he repented his self-assured tone, for the ensuing silence revealed that no one, not even Szegedi, supported such unequivocal decisiveness.

"That's not right!" It was Löffler who broke the silence. "We can't leave a man all by himself in such uncertainty."

Szerb, if only to maintain his self-respect, stuck to his original position, although somewhat shaken that no one took his side:

"You're saying this, you of all people, one of the original residents here, who should really know what's what? There was hardly a more pious Jew than you here, and yet you're capable of suggesting that we should say the prayer for the dead over a living person?"

"Who said that?" Löffler flared up, indignant. "All I'm saying is that you can't deny such a request coming from an old man who may be, God forbid, preparing for death, as long as it sets his mind at peace, as long as it makes him feel secure about his place in the eternal world. That's all I'm saying!" He was so upset that again he had trouble seeing, and snatched off his eyeglasses, starting to rub them angrily against his cardigan sleeve.

A murmur of agreement sounded all down the corridor. The debating parties turned in the direction of the women. Now that the congregation once numbering several hundred had dwindled to barely a dozen or two, mutual esteem had bestowed an indefinable dignity to the remaining few. At any rate, the women, too, had a right to

comment on the events. Even Mr Molnár, who had been excluded from the circle of men, now tried to join the muttering chorus of women. In vain did he pull at his wife's dress to restrain her from a hasty pronouncement; she turned on him, sharply reprimanded him, called for everyone's attention, and spoke with a certain ceremoniousness in her voice:

"The Women's Group supports the Löffler proposition."

Now it was the men who started to mutter and uncle Sámuel, having in the meantime adjusted his hearing aid and found out what he had missed, now raised his voice, which was highly unusual for him:

"You all know that Löffler is a close friend of mine. He and I have grown old together in this ghost house. But now I say, with all due respect, let us ask old Schweiger, couldn't he agree to do this thing the way it is done customarily."

He said, "old Schweiger", although he himself was older; he was the oldest one among them, but he did not provide any further explanations.

A long pause followed, the silence after a debate, while all of them realized that they would not, and could not come to a decision.

"So, who should go in to see him?" said Szegedi, clearing his throat, again managing to grasp the essential issue.

"Let Löffler talk to him," the jeweler proposed.

"It was you who insisted, so why don't you talk to him?!" protested Löffler.

"Who, me? Why not his roommate? After all he brought the message."

Andor Bíró jerked his head in agitation. Thus far he stayed in the background, a mere messenger, who thought his task was over and done with; now he felt miserable that he would be again assigned the duties of a messenger, especially in such a muddle. He said not a word, merely blinked, awaiting the verdict.

"Let him be!" interjected Krausz. "Altmann will go in. Isn't that right, Altmann?"

"You mean me, Chief Cantor?" The shames would have liked to object, but the cantor cut him off:

"That's right, you. This way the whole thing will have a certain official aspect."

The terse explanation pervaded Altmann with a sense of his responsibility: he was to represent the whole community, and was expected to exercise the requisite diplomatic tact in this rather delicate situation. Of course he did not think through his task quite to the last detail, and he would not have been able to outline its theoretical implications, but he grasped its essence and acted accordingly.

He paused in front of the door, bent forward at the waist as if he were listening for some sound from within, only to knock on the door, then pressed down the door-handle. While he was inside, the rest of the group stood around in the corridor in silence. A clatter of dishes startled them -- it was a cat jumping up on the waxcloth covering the long dining table, to disrupt their tense concentration -- but the cook sent in the kitchen girl to create order, and after the noise of the chase subsided there came some more moments of waiting.

Then the door opened a crack, and Altmann appeared in the opening. He stepped outside, and balanced himself on the broad threshold, hanging on to the door handle.

They all closed in on him in a threatening manner, pressing him back even more.

"So tell us, what's going on?" Berger urged, although thus far he gave no evidence that the outcome was of the least interest to him. Now that the climax was approaching he could no longer contain his excitement.

"I told him what you all said."

"And so, is he willing to change his demands?" Mr Szerb was still out to get satisfaction for his wounded pride, which was his chief reason for asking.

Altmann was obviously straining to quote Schweiger's exact words, mechanically repeating them even though the meaning was beyond him.

"He says that it's not because of himself that he insists."

"So who else?" Szerb snapped, but the look Löffler gave him made him regret asking the question.

"Even so, I wouldn't do it! We simply can't." Old Sámuel's face reflected his inner struggle. "If we do this for him today, tomorrow we might as well go worship the golden calf!"

Löffler turned beet red from all the emotion. His restrained voice squeezed the words out one by one:

"You don't understand, do you, that there is no tomorrow, no golden calf. There's nothing! It's just us, here and now. We won't exist tomorrow."

Both Berger and Altmann stepped in to intervene, but Löffler was no longer addressing only old Sámuel.

"He knows just as well as we do that it is not done this way. So why is he doing this to us?" He wildly gesticulated, and from the way old Sámuel was fiddling with his hearing aid it was obvious that he, too, was agitated.

"Then let's go in," said Krausz, because no one else would say this.

The women moved aside from the doorway, and the cook sent the sniffing kitchen girl back to the dining hall.

They knocked, and, although they received no response, all filed into the room, one after another. Old Schweiger, leaning on his elbow, attempted to sit up but dropped back, and when Bíró stepped closer to help him, he waved him off. No one said a word; they stood in a semi-circle around the bed. Löffler raised his head, looking around to meet the cantor's eyes, gestured in a questioning manner, wanting to know which way they should turn, whereupon Krausz signaled back. Like a conductor, he held up his right arm, and waited for everyone's attention, but old Sámuel's quavering voice already began to recite the kaddish for the dead, and their voices all followed. Even Mr Molnár joined in, chanting in a voice that was more and more breathless, panting. One could tell he was making a great effort reading from the borrowed prayerbook the phonetic Latin transcription of the text, but his poorly pronounced accents made him repeatedly fall behind so that when the others, taking short steps backward and forward, recited the last lines, he was still in the middle of the prayer. They heard him out without a sound as he finished with great gulps no doubt due to his excitement. Those who had already finished now once more pronounced the *Omeyn*.

Szegedi, unable to bear the weight of the silence that descended upon them, again felt it incumbent on him to help others by speaking up:

"Well, how was that, Mr Schweiger?" he inquired convivially, and attempted a smile.

"Your mind can rest at ease now," muttered Mr Szerb in the hope that his role in the debate will have been forgotten.

"Do you think you can get up for dinner?" asked the cantor, but no one else could add a word, for by now they were all staring at Mr Molnár. He stood with his hands pressed against his face and only his shaking body revealed that he was soundlessly weeping.

"But Mr Molnár, please, not in front of him!" Berger whispered.

"Can't you see it is all over, and you're still mouthing your say?"

They looked at Mr Molnár's distorted face, then at the motionless body he was pointing at: old Schweiger's face, his features at rest, his eyes wide open and staring.

The cantor stepped over to the dead man and pulled his eyelids closed. And they all stood, mutely, until Löffler thought of putting his hand on Molnár's shoulder. Then they stood, waiting, the nine of them, and although they knew precisely what was to be done, they did not have the slightest idea what they should do.

Translated by John Bátki

*

The Funeral

rabbi was my fault, that's definite, it was me insisting that it should be a young man, it was me, being self-important, playing the insider, saying that he was talented and must be given a chance to work, that he should bury my grandmother, my father's mother, because it's for her that the family was now gathering together, *di gantze mispoche* (minus the emigrants), all the friends and colleagues, those who came to laugh, the grateful survivors and the bored pensioners, the whole *kileh*, all gathering here next to the mortuary since nobody dares go in before the family and at the same time they cannot see how under the velvety surface of good manners their presence is a cruel interference with the life (or death) of a family, how every look of their eyes and every sentence they utter splinters the intimacy of the last hidden moments, but there is nothing to be done, they cannot be sent away, so we all step into the domed chamber, cold air grabs my back, even though the April sun is shining outside, its rays raking away the last remnants of winter, licking at the roof and the walls but the heat and the light don't come into the building and while in the depth of the cellar under the vaulted space there are bodies prepared for their funeral at some later time, one story higher, one step closer to the end of the ceremony are we, the closer family, placed according to a strict choreography on both sides of the coffin, the women on one side, the men on the other, all on a small dais, as if on stage, and down there, in front of the ungainly coffin sit the viewers, the audience, *I hope they are not going to clap*, says a flash of despair in my brain, I push up closer to my father on the bench, I can feel that he is shaking, leaning forward, from the back half profile I can only see his hat, sitting funnily on the top of his head, the rim cannot take hold on the thick curly hair over his round face, it is just balancing there, to avoid falling off, but his body is shaking and I feel paralysed, even though he is crying in front of these inquisitive eyes, he should at least cover his face so they cannot see him, it's shameful after all, and what is most annoying is that he is crying in front of me, after all you should never see your father cry, but then who else could he cry in front of, this is absurd, and I can't even move, I would be hurt if he shifted away and I don't really know how he would react to a gesture of sympathy, but my hand is already there on his back, whatever happens, but nothing does, he is still shaking with sobs, I lean forward, and at last he buries his face in his right hand, but he is sobbing like a child, the still moment is a scandal and I am helpless, I do not know my role, what I can do and what I should do, up here, on the stage, in the crossfire of peeping eyes, where in a moment we become degraded to secondary characters when the cantor begins to sing and the rabbi fills his lungs with air, getting ready for his funeral address, head up, stomach in, chest out, there he goes, starting already, speaking freely, wanting to impress, he was taking notes eagerly a couple of days ago when, preparing for the occasion, he had a talk with my mother and my father who then lengthily enumerated all the stages of my grandmother's life story, the relatives 'who must be mentioned', friends 'who were so close to her', and now he does not even look at his notes, a top of the class student at his exam, confusing, without a flicker of the eye, relatives, names and facts, a sister's heroism with a cousin's barely convincing sympathy, so that the unworthy are elevated and those who remained loyal get barely a mention, and my face is burning as I seek out my mother's eyes where she is sitting, chewing her lips, over in the circle of female relatives, watching with frightened and motionless eyes the irredeemable happen, around her those concerned are looking our way with unmoving waxen eyes like figures in a gallery, I cautiously look at my father, his hat slid back, his tears all spent, his eyes round with amazement, shaking his head disapprovingly, a grain of sand creaking in the machinery of mourning, as if he was saying life is a series of *tsoreses* and my stomach cramps up with the thought of: why did I

push, since the rabbi is my fault, that is definite, now he waves his arm, conducting, we must all stand up, a crowd of people, all leaving now, while the coffin is dragged onto a handcart, the iron-shod wooden wheels rattling along the chipped cobbles of the little pathway, the whole structure wobbling, so that the grave-diggers must hold on to it on both sides, as though the cantor was praying in his broken voice for the coffin not to fall off instead of offering his monotonous song to guide the dead soul to the kingdom of *Sheol* where the voice would lead it like a flickering candle, if the song was not drowned in the whirlpool, the flotsam of agitated conversations, because the one-armed woman, my grandmother's sister, whose body was torn on the ramp at Birkenau and whose noble generosity the rabbi attributed to another relative while she was only mentioned briefly and in passing, is now gesticulating fiercely and, filtered through her thick fur hat, I catch the scraps of her tearful laments, reprimanding my mother who is entreating her not to do it here and now, please, to stop, they can discuss it afterwards, but can she please wait until the ceremony is over, then giving up she steps back to my father, takes his arm, I join them too, we stand beside her, one on each side and walk off slowly, silently arm in arm, while I feel I could kill the one-armed woman for making a scene even though she is right and it is ultimately my fault, it was me insisting that the rabbi should be a young man, it was me being self-important, saying that he was talented and then he ends up causing all this trouble, I am seething with pent up anger looking for its object, but now we are standing around the grave, surrounding the stone slab under which rest the ashes of my grandmother's parents, because 'I want to rest at my parents' feet' my grandmother used to say always, and so she will unless the earth collapses because they had to dig her grave in under the other two and there is no guarantee that if it goes in at all in the first place, the soil will hold up the earlier vault with the heavy granite sheet, now that it has been disturbed, and now another problem, they will have to shift the coffin sideways into the cavity under the stone, and the coffin, laden with the heavy body always gets stuck, giving trouble to the grave-diggers, but at least they are not cold as they try to stuff into the ground *the box containing my grandmother*, this is a powerful woman fighting a rear-guard action, her last struggle for this world, she will not be easily ousted from life, everyone is watching keenly, exchanging whispers now and then, my parents' faces terrified, please, let nothing go wrong, please let this agony come to an end now, finally the coffin reaches the ground with a heavy jerk of the head-end on the cold, hard clay wall so that my mother and father wince almost in unison, but it is in now, finally the other end goes in as well, they offer the shovel, kaddish? asks the rabbi, but my father declines it, he can start, and indeed the rabbi starts, *Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabo*, while the clumps of earth keep falling, *hallowed and praised be his name*, he just goes on and on, *in this world which He created according to his will*, although he has nothing to do with the deceased, *and may he build his kingdom in your lives and your days*, not with anyone, dead or alive, *and in the life of the whole of the house of Israel, in the future and in the days to come*, there is no personal intimacy, *and say unto this: Amen*, only merciless beauty, *may His great Name be blessed for all eternity and into eternity, for ever and ever*, and faithfulness, *may He be hallowed and praised*, in the face of everything, *honoured and glorified*, again and again, *reverenced and exalted*, repeatedly shown, *may the Name of the Holy One be worshipped and hallowed*, when you are defrauded by your neighbour, *may He be blessed who dwells in glory*, by your ally, *higher than all the blessings and song, praise and solace that may be uttered in this world*, because he is the only one, *and say unto this: Amen*, and thus the conditions are uneven, *may there be plentiful peace from heaven and life unto us and to the whole of Israel*, but we say it, we must say it, *and say unto this: Amen*, for this very reason, *He who brings peace in the highness may bring peace to us and the whole of Israel*, and so may it be inscribed in the book of eternal life, *and say unto this: Amen*, Händele bat Chana, the rabbi pronounces my grandmother's Hebrew name in careful, sonorous syllables and they are already thudding the side of the grave flat and straight

where it had been opened and covered again, a shiver runs down my spine, as it does every time I think of immobility, the *immovability* down there, under the tons of earth, even if the boards are not nailed together and even in spite of my desperate faith that the bones will one day set out on their way to Jerusalem I know that *it is nasty* down there, even worse than up here where friends and strangers offer to shake hands so that I dive into the crowd, trying to disappear, far from the family, far from them, whom I have at least something to do with, because that is really more than I can put up with, grabbing my hand, shaking it heartily or with a short masculine shake or groping at it with slimy softness and whispering in my ears their hot-breathed *Please-take-my-condolences*, or perhaps just nodding their heads with gritted teeth, *I-know-how-you-feel*, no way, no, my pain is mine, I know all those who are also hurt by all this and that is enough, I do not need the spice of words now, leave me the immaterial medium of silence, the only possibility of contact with worlds other or beyond or over, with them that live and survive in them, where there are no tips like this that my father now puts in the palms of the grave-diggers who have been on tenterhooks about it for several minutes and who now, at long last, and with frequent bowing, finally abandon us, to leave us a minute or two, some time for pottering around the grave, those minutes when you do not want to go yet although there is nothing left to do and you must hurry because the *wider* family are already approaching the gate, we are trying to catch them up to invite them to my grandmother's flat where sandwiches, drinks, cakes and sweets are awaiting, carefully prepared, the guests of the 'burial feast', this is barbaric I say to my mother, why don't they all go home, but she calls after them, not even reacting to what I say, repressing what she wanted to say, just waving to the others to wait until we catch them up at the gate of the cemetery, but she cannot even utter her words of invitation because, as if a bottle were unplugged, all ceremoniousness ends here, anger hisses and scratches as all the repressed tension bursts forth, lead by the one-armed woman, my grandmother's sister, who screams in a high voice, that it was deliberate, it was done on purpose, she had always known, had always felt they disliked her, and that we had bribed the rabbi or deliberately misinformed him, she screams in a half cry while my mother backs away bending forward slightly, her hands pressed on her breast, laughing hysterically, on the edge of snapping, good job my father is still busy paying the rabbi, out of earshot, and most of the family have said good bye and left, of course my mother must not be left alone so I, too, contribute a few rather angry words so that my mother ends up pacifying me, then suddenly everybody falls silent, the rabbi, who is my fault, this is definite, is coming out, it was me being self-important, playing the insider, saying he was talented, insisting that it should be a young man and now he passes among us as though he were the Word itself and even asks whether we were 'quite contented' with his speech but soon comes to regret his enquiries because the next minute the one-armed woman answers him and even though he cannot really make out what went wrong he becomes part of the whole shouting match from which I softly withdraw to look out for my father, perhaps he has gone back to the grave I am trying telepathically to tell him not to come, he is really the last one to need this row at the end of which the offended person will declare no forgiveness and only my mother and the rabbi will be left standing in the doorway, thinking how the whole error could be set right, and finally they will agree that the rabbi is to describe in a letter what had happened, apologising for his error but now he must say good bye and be off, and we are leaving also, I must catch my train, my mother and father are staying behind to sort out some of the paperwork, but I must go home, away, away from this town where I no longer have any reason to come, except for remembrance of course but the day is still not over since, after I tell my mother and father to go and not wait at the railway station and I lean my head against the cool glass of the carriage, staring out, and the train heaves itself into motion with a heavy, breathless puffing, at that moment I see the rabbi arriving,

running in his black suit and his curly-rimmed bowler hat, catching the same train back to the city but I quickly look the other way, turn round, sit down, tug the curtain, everything to avoid him seeing me, to make sure he does not come to sit here and to avoid having to talk to him, since I even feel slightly guilty towards him, which is why I hide my face behind the smoky material and fall softly asleep to the increasingly rhythmical rattle of the train but still see before my eyes my mother and my father entering the musty flat, my mother pottering nervously, but then, admitting its pointlessness, give it up, sit down, then stand up again, sigh and begin to take stock of all the things that must be given away or thrown away while my father, not knowing what to do with himself, floats about, slightly embarrassed like a shy stranger at a party, until he comes to the tray of sandwiches waiting for the guests, he reaches out a hesitant hand, selecting two pieces, putting them on a plate, methodically preparing, taking a table napkin, biting the sandwich with gusto, this is nice, he says to my mother, his face filling out, then, suddenly looking caught out, he tries to hide a childish smile, he is ashamed of himself, grinding his mouthful of food while, like feverish broken eyes the lead crystal glasses glitter sadly on the tea-trolley.

Translated by Orsolya Frank

*

Jam

– Miklós

...

– Miklós!

– They are driving me nuts! – I murmur to Juli. – You should go out. I am working. What do they want again?

Juli goes out but immediately comes back.

– Please don't do that! She wants to speak to you. She knows that you are here.

I stand up swearing from my laptop. I go out from the house to the garden.

Outside the house is already hotness, inside it is pleasantly cool.

– I'm here, Mrs Farkas. What would you like?

– Miklós, my dear, don't be angry because I tell you again but I know that you will go home the day after tomorrow. Don't leave those wonderful peaches on the tree! It's not a big deal to pick them. Why waste them?

– OK, Mrs Farkas. We'll have a look.

– Don't just look at them, pick them.

– All right. We will. Excuse me but I need to work. I've brought some work to do.

I go back to the house and am raging to Juli.

– How dare they tell me what I should be doing in my garden and what I shouldn't? Just because we have been spending our holidays in neighboring gardens for twenty-five years. They treat me as if I were still a child.

– OK, calm down. It was nice of her to say that.

– But she said that yesterday too.

– Then I will pick them.

– Don't be silly. They aren't ripe yet. What will we do with them?

– We will bottle them.

– But you have never bottled anything. We never eat preserves at all. I hardly even eat fruit. Don't give a shit about it! Go and read something, relax, lie in the sun. We'll go home in two days.

We leave it at that. I am very much annoyed that the neighbors don't realize: I have grown up. I don't spend whole summers here at the Balaton as in my childhood, only two weeks when I work – or at least when I would work – just like at home. It is good to be away from home but gardening is not exactly my thing. As a matter of fact, because of my allergies I never go into nature if I don't have to. Mornings I write in the house or on the terrace, managing to breathe with medication and inhalers. Afternoons we usually go to the beach to swim and to lie in the sun. True, we don't stay there for too long because I get burned easily; my skin is very sensitive. The doctor has told me I am predisposed to skin cancer so I need to be careful with sunbathing. Evenings we often warm up some food over the campfire or cook dinner in a stew-pot or just get a drink somewhere or have some wine on the terrace with guests.

I plunge into my work when they call out again.

– Miklós!

– Oh shit!

Juli is laughing.

– Tell them I will pick the peaches.

– I don't care if you pick them. I don't want you to pick them! I want them to leave us alone. They should not interfere in our lives!

- Don't shout, Miki! They'll hear it.
- So what?
- Oh, come on. Don't be so grumpy. She is such a kind woman.
- But I don't want her to order me about!
- Miklós!!!
- I am coming! – I am shouting. This time it is the man Mrs Farkas lives with.
- I am here, Mr. Fehér, what's the problem?

The old man is standing beyond the wire fence, balancing a ladder on his shoulder.

- Your ladder is not tall enough. It would be easier with ours.

I wish he'd go to hell. It is not enough that they look into our garden; now they will send me up a tree not to leave a single peach on it. Why do they think they can order me around just because they are neighbors, just because the old chick has known me since I was a kid?

- Mr. Fehér, I am not sure I will have time for...
- Come on, Miklós! You don't want to leave those nice peaches to rot, do you?

- We don't...

- Hey, hold that ladder or it will break our fence!

I catch it, I take it, I lean it. I could howl from rage because it is getting late and I am nowhere with my daily work. I am about to walk back to the house.

- You won't even try it? – says the old guy affronted.
- Later! – I snap at him, and wave impatiently that I must go.
- But later it will be warmer.
- I have to go to the village to buy food for the weekend.
- OK, it will wait for you.

Inside Juli is cooking lunch. I don't talk to her. I return to my computer but I can't even work. I am so tense.

Shortly after that Mrs Farkas shouts the name of Juli. Juli goes out. The click-clack of her clogs on the stairs is unmistakable. I look out of the window: they are talking at the fence. She is not the first woman to spend some time here with me and get along well with the neighbors. It's clear they like her, but they liked my previous girlfriends too. At least they had somebody to talk to. These women are interpreters between me and the outside world. (A good theme I could use later.)

My communication with the neighbors is difficult and I can barely stand their views. It is embarrassing for me that they witnessed my childhood, of which I have few memories. They witnessed how I grew up and how many things changed in the world around me and in my inner world. Besides, they divided the world into two categories: the Lefties and the Nazis. I try to believe that there are shades in-between and there is more to the world than that. I cannot forget the respect that my family showed to the husband of Mrs Farkas in my childhood, and how he accepted that humility. He was a director of a big company and a high-ranking party officer. On weekdays he was a functionary and at weekends just a man with pot belly in grayish, shabby shorts. I only liked his Mercedes, in which he once drove me to school to Budapest in an hour on a road where we had needed an hour and a half. He had the privilege of speeding. When he died and Mr. Fehér – who was shorter by a head than the Mrs. Farkas – had appeared with the widow, all we knew that he was only a substitute, but everybody was happy not to see Mrs. Farkas alone. But I never thought they would form such a coalition to worry about my peach-harvest.

- What did she want? – I ask Juli. – Did she give you some advice on canning?

– How did you know? – she begins to laugh. – She is really so kind. She told me how we can ripen them if they are too hard.

– I don't care. I'm not willing to pick peaches. I don't want you to drudge with the jars as my mother did.. I really don't understand why we need all of that. They don't need it either, and my parents could also buy it in any shop. They really shouldn't worry that they will not have anything to eat.

The morning is over. Before lunch I bike to the supermarket. It is impossible to work in the afternoon heat, so we go to the lake. I try to read – but in vain. Yet another day wasted. If I don't write or read, I don't see any purpose of my life. In the evening we take a walk and get a beer in the garden of a pub, where we cannot help hearing a man in khakis that “a Jewish whore has given a blow job to the American president and that's why the Yankees side with the Israelis.” I consider interrupting but he is with a big group and they are drunk. Juli nudges me to leave and to keep out. We will never come here again.

Arriving home we close the garden gate and the shutters on the street side. Juli is afraid of having it be dark outside and light inside. She is convinced that somebody will shoot at us. There is just a small black and white Russian television set in the cottage, on which we can only watch one channel. Where the other channels are ants fight in a dark tunnel. We should have cable but we don't know whether it is worth investing in this weedy plot and decaying cottage or it would be better to sell the whole shebang. I'm definitely not the right man to oversee the refurbishment of a house. After some banter we make love. I feel her skin smelling of coconut sun lotion and water. What she feels on me I don't know, maybe impatience over wasting yet another day without writing a line.

The next morning I am trying to write again and nervously look around whether Mrs. Farkas or Mr. Fehér appear at the fence. Instead of them, Juli emerges from the house in tiny shorts that show off her bottom and in a sleeveless shirt that leaves her belly button bare and in which her breasts flutter fleetly. She's wearing sneakers and there is a basket on her arm. As if she was leaving for the store.

– I'll pick some peaches. I'll make some compote.

– Compote? From those stone-hard peaches? For God's sake, don't be crazy! Don't let yourself remote-controlled by them.

– But really, why we leave them rotting on the tree?

– I don't like compotes.

– At home it will ripen on the balcony.

– Let's not open a market garden! We will buy ripe peaches in the market. By the way, I only like nectarines. This stuff is fuzzy and tickles my throat.

– I will pick some anyway and make it for myself. You may have some if you like.

We leave it at that. If Juli decides something, it is impossible to dissuade her. It's better for me to pull in my feelers. Perhaps this will shut the neighbors up. In the evening, as we come in from the lakeside, before we even open the garden gate, Mrs. Farkas and Mr. Fehér appear at the other side of the fence.

– We did see that Julika picked the peaches! – says Mrs. Farkas proudly.

Now at least they can be satisfied.

– But she picked them only from below while that high ladder is there! – Mr. Fehér looks at me with a critical expression on his face. – And you plan to go home tomorrow.

– I am sure you will have enough time, my dear Miki – I hear the pleading voice of Mrs. Farkas. – Don't let those wonderful peaches rot!

Juli is nudging me, but I can't keep calm.

– If you want to, Mrs. Farkas, you are welcome to come round tomorrow and pick as much as you wish.

– That was not the point, my dear Miklós. But I would be sorry if they stayed there. I have already bottled some peaches.

They seem to have been hurt. They don't say anything else, just look sad as I angrily drag the rubber mattress .

It is Saturday night, Juli's friends drop in from Siófok. They are of our age, the guy is American, the girl Hungarian. They live in San Francisco and come home every summer. They bring a bottle of kosher wine, which is flattering —they thought of me. We make a fire, roast fish and drink some wine. We are getting into a good mood. Juli switches on the tape recorder and we dance on the terrace. She is tipsy, her face and body are hot, she is enjoying herself. I am also getting relaxed because of the alcohol but I don't dare to drink a lot; my stomach can't take it any more. The American asks Juli to dance. I become jealous and start dancing with the girlfriend. She also dances well and is, just like me, jealous. Ostentatiously she is pushing her pelvis into me.

After they go, Juli is peevish but when I say that she started it and I just responded to what she did and didn't want anything from her girlfriend, she calms down. We crave each other. The sun, the water and closeness of nature are good for us: we get closer to our inner self. We go to the beach and near the jetty we descend into the chest-high water. In the freshness of the August night the lake is really warm. Nobody comes here at midnight so we can make love at leisure. The mood of the place has a great impact on both of us. We need to be careful just because of the sounds that our throats make. Although it is late at night, somebody can hear our voices.

– I was jealous – she confesses as we are stumbling home in the dark. – She was eyeing you throughout the dinner. Don' tell me you didn't notice that! This is the sort of a chick she'll grab you if she wants you. Even the next day she' ll still be sucking you.

Her vulgarity excites me, and she knows it. Until now I thought that intellect and naturalness can't stand each other but apparently she is an exception. In her I have found what I have been looking for. It might be that Juli's profession, psychology, makes it possible, or it is the empathy that emanates from her, but through her I have begun to accept my dualities. After all, man is an animal who prays to God.

By the time we get home, we are too tired to make love again. We fall onto the bed, but even then Juli has the strength to stand up and close the window-shutters.

– I am afraid that I might lose you – that is the last thing she says before falling asleep and which can catch. Could it help us if I admitted to her that although I haven't any tangible reason I too am afraid?

In the morning we defrost the fridge and start packing and evacuating. I dislike travels of all kind, and going home is not any better.. I can feel miserable everywhere but preparations for a trip are the worst. Although there is plenty of time I have no patience to write because Juli is continuously puttering. I am ready to help her but she sends me out from the kitchen. She cannot throw away any food so she packs everything that will not last till next spring. Who knows whether we come to the Balaton again this year? But if we came, we would bring everything again.

– Miklós! – Mr. Fehér is calling.

If he tells me again to pick peaches, I will lose it.

– Is your offer still valid?

– Which offer, Mr. Fehér?

– To come over and pick the peaches.

– Sure, you are really welcome! – I answer and I rush in to tell Juli that they are coming to harvest.

– I know. They've already asked me. And they have asked whether we would leave the key if they couldn't pick all of them today, so they could come over later.

– And what did you say?

– That they should ask you.

– Their pettiness is unbelievable – I explode. – This is some mania.

– Oh, don't be like that! You could be a bit more sympathetic. Try to understand them!

– What the hell should I need to understand? This *haper-macher** attitude? On top of their Communist veterans' pension?

– You're a writer; how come you don't have more empathy?

– Enough already! – I get out of the kitchen, astonished to see that Juli has deserted and betrayed me, or also has gone mad. I don't want to participate in this. I go back to the terrace to my laptop and see Mr. Farkas ambling into our garden. He sets the ladder upright and starts picking the peaches.

I can't concentrate on my work. I am nervous because of his presence as he is pottering behind me. He is seventy-five and yet he is clambering up the tree. I shut off the computer and I go into the house. He keeps coming and going, and he is still working when I begin carrying gear to the car. He calls out:

– Miklós! So would you leave the gate key? I haven't finished yet. The top of the tree it is almost full. I mean, if you don't mind. When we go to Budapest, we'll bring back the key.

I try to restrain the sounds that are about to break out from my throat.

– No problem, Mr. Fehér. Go ahead and pick! Take your time returning the key. – Let them pick every single one of the fucking peaches.

I close the house, switch off the electricity, close the water main, the master switch of the water heater and then double-check everything again, the same way my father did although I know I did everything exactly the way he taught me.

I bang down the lid of the bin and take a big bag of garbage to the trash container near the road when Mrs. Farkas calls.

– Miklós! Please come in when you are finished. I want to tell you something. Just a minute.

As if she was watching me when I appear. We walk into the garden and across the neatly mowed lawn between the rose bushes. She sits us down in the gazebo on a bench made of logs sawn lengthwise. She takes a deep breath, leans over the table and puts her hand on my arm.

– Don't be angry at me for keeping you but I don't want you to think of me as a total idiot.

I am about to protest but she carries on

– Don't make excuses, just listen to me. You know, although we were not deported like your parents and grandparents, we also suffered. We pulled through the winter of nineteen forty-four with my mother and father in the Budapest ghetto. I was a child when I heard the story from her. For the last eight days we only had a jar of jam left. A single jar of jam. – Her voice is shaking, makes a deep sigh and her face shows

* People who want to get everything. (Yiddish)

that she is struggling not to be overcome by emotion. – She permitted herself and my father only one spoon each day. They gave me two spoonfuls. And when the Soviets liberated the ghetto, there was still some at the bottom of the jar. So that's why...

We are silent. She takes off her hand of my arm. I don't dare to look at Juli.

– You are welcome to pick the peaches – I hear my own voice from very far. Juli is holding back. She only begins to cry in the car as we drive off.

Translated by Iván Sella with the author

Being a (Hungarian-) Jewish Writer The Anatomy of a Paradox

1.

I call somebody a writer who records stories, shapes characters, and builds lives and destinies into parables even if their raw material is taken from characters and events of the reality outside the literary work. It is not the enumeration of things that never happened that makes a text fiction but the way it handles its material, and rearranges its elements, in other words the very quality of creative formation. It cannot be summarised, it cannot be 'told', or communicated in a transformed fashion, since its effect is mediated by its entirety through the economical harmony of its plot, structure, atmosphere, and style. I can write it in the first person singular, I can place my hero into a co-ordinate system that correlates with my life story and yet a story will be born. Or I can write a 'fiction' in the third person singular which is objective, dispassionate and loaded with alienating effects and yet everything in it can be a truly lived personal experience. All this is contingent. What grants writing credit is that it could happen outside the book as it has happened inside the book. The reality of the work is equivalent with the reality of life. What distinguishes literature from essayistic non fiction and journalism is that while a reporter writes *about* something the writer *creates* something. No matter how sophisticated, the former is a reproduction while the latter builds from the writer's self, or in the case of truly great works calls into existence that which seems to have been waiting already in some pre existence. If it is good then it is literature without further qualifications even if it based on a report-like factual investigation or an experience that was lived through down to its last and most detailed element. The writer depicts with the power of original creation, they illustrate, orient, provide viewpoints, this becomes primary over the events of the story, beyond narration, style, condensation and linguistic precision it is this that distinguishes it from event-centred reportage no matter how exciting or lyrical is the subject matter of the latter.

A Jew I call somebody who is a member of this community through origin or conversion, but from a literary point of view I would also include those who, although converting to other religions, or hiding, have the referential component palpable in the tissue of their work.

By Hungarian-Jewish literature I mean that group of works which comes from a writer as defined above or is thematically connected to that segment or is rooted in the multifarious history of that group which nonetheless shows identifiable trends, shows the psychological peculiarities of that group or simply reflects the life experiences of the community narrower than the language community itself in an unspoken, latent fashion, through reflexes working even against the authorial intention.

By being included in this group, works do not lose their entitlement to belong to the wider sphere of Hungarian literature also, since they also carry the legacy of the latter but their shared characteristics also support the definition above and presuppose an inner history which also fits them into a different, horizontal context that exceeds linguistic boundaries, justifying the logic of diasporic existence. Writers and works of this community which repeats typical life stories in the conditions of dispersion are connected by central axes of experience, by a kinship of mental habits and ways of thinking and this includes the medium and characters of prose fiction, most descriptive from our point of view, which are often related to the milieu and person of their author.

*

Being a Hungarian-Jewish writer, however, means more than an accidental choice of subject matter, a few give-away signs or the passive acceptance of the description of one's works as such. To be a Hungarian-Jewish writer and to create such literature is a task in the future tense. The mission means more than the purposeful creation of works relating to this theme but also the fulfilment of an active role in forming the new image of this cultural enclosure, in representing it within the Hungarian intellectual scene and integrating it with the Jewish world at large. It means an orientation and a commitment which does not limit a writer's credit and freedom but serves to channel attention.

*

There is a sharp caesura between Jewish writers who accept the above categorisation and those who protest against it. For the latter it is unacceptable to place any form of a filter between the author who is engaged in battle with the absolute and his/her subject, a filter which might in some way diminish the writer's individuality, their impressive Don Quixotian solitude.

There is also a caesura between Jewish society in general and the writer, as the writer depicts, criticises, gossips while the former could only learn from its errors or smile at its own distorted mirror image, mis-drawn features, *post historiam*, if it had an unusual amount of sophisticated intelligence.

There is a further gap between Europe and the United States since the latter was untouched by the age of terror, its shadow only reached there in the form of refugees, immigrant survivors and the guilt of those contemporaries who were born out there and were consequently never touched by the events.

And finally there is a gap between East and West represented by the communist dictatorship which cast its shadow over the second half of the 20th century. Its policy of forced assimilation rendered a full Jewish life impossible even beyond the decades of its rule (as it did any other free and unintimidated self definition.) Since by breaking up

continuities it paralysed for a long time to come this segment of autonomous intellectual existence. This is something that is built on and is rooted in a form of life which is passed on from generation to generation. Thus the breach of one link in the generational chain after the voluntary assimilation that took place in the first part of the century, and after the shock of the *Shoah*, threatens to have consequences which are as yet unpredictable.

Thus it is easy to draw up on paper the type of the Hungarian-Jewish writer but in reality they offer any sign on life.

*

Being a Hungarian-Jewish writer today has to mean that one goes beyond all that caused the anaemic impoverishment, or hindered the expansion, of this area before the second world war.

In the last decades of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries the mass of slowly secularising Yiddish-speakers in Poland, Russia and, after mass emigration, in the United States meant a market which received and stimulated the literature that dealt with it, in its popular self-consciousness, its loosening religious frame and its emerging reading public. (In the Russian areas some community remained even after the linguistic transition, obviously as a result of the stiffer reserve of the landowning class, and thus authors who often published in Russian as well as Yiddish opened the way to literature written in the new language but maintaining its characteristic Jewish subject matter and approach.)

In Hungary this faction never emerged. National-communal consciousness was declining together with religious life and the assimilating strata whose practice of the tradition was becoming more and more fragmented and superficial failed both as subject matter and as primary consumer public to ferment an emergent Hungarian-Jewish literature which thus lagged far behind the examples just mentioned. All the negative signs of its national (often religious) and social assimilation, its uncertain, mobile self-image which was changing according to external circumstances would have warranted a satirical authorial attitude best of all, but this approach did not become wide spread. This was probably due to the feeling of being excluded from the taste of the time and thus from audience reception, as well as to the inevitable intellectual circumstances of the background, to the new type of anti-semitism and to the fact that writers' ambitions always took into account the expectations of the reading public.

Ultimately, the writers emerged from this circle of assimilants and even if in theory they were enabled by their alternative vision, their enhanced ability of self reflection and their in-born or acquired critical eye to write about their milieu, they rarely built an oeuvre on this subject matter. Writers were usually put off this theme by paralysing inhibitions, by the lack of a broad publishing scene and by the reservations of the Jewish reading public who were assimilating even in their choice of reading, and followed the contemporary Hungarian taste, but also by the lack of feedback from a wider audience. The few exceptions (works by Károly Pap, novels by Béla Zsolt, Lajos Hatvany's *Masters and Men*, András Komor's *The Offspring of S. Fischmann*, to mention only the most important) received understanding and attention but not from the Jewish press which sank into silence or rejected the criticisms directed against Jews. The best of the contemporary Hungarian writers noticed the works of these authors who possessed and used in their work a deep inside knowledge of the micro-community, and some of them were totally unprejudiced in encouraging Jewish writers to depict their background in a conscious and emphatic manner and thus introduce it to be included among the topical themes of Hungarian literature. This encouragement however was still not enough to inspire a broad-ranging Hungarian-Jewish literature which could produce great works.

*

Understandably but regrettably Jewish writers did not strive to create works in this area or they turned away from it as a result of unappreciated efforts. This may have been a sign of their own assimilation or it may have been a part of their ambition to achieve a wider reputation and success, or it may have been a hurt response to the critical rejection or even more upsetting, indifference, that they encountered in their own 'religious press'.

Thanks to short story writers of the second and third division or to those who because of a consistent choice of subject matter, never made it to the first rank and never achieved eminence in the literary world, there never used to be a shortage of lightweight shorter fiction in Jewish newspapers and magazines. These really did present Jewish society, allowing a glimpse of its social stratification, religious habits, and everyday life. (During the era of terror their career was disrupted but some of the few survivors continued their work in Israel, creating a linguistically isolated emigrant literature with all its customary difficulties. Added to these difficulties is the fact that even if the writers themselves found a new home the tone of their writing, which evokes the old home, the good old days of peace, and which is often dusty and old fashioned is a tell tale symptom of the homeless wandering Jewish destiny.) A general characteristic of the shorter fiction earlier referred to is that apart from a few exceptions its texts do not go really deep. It is not merely a generic peculiarity if they do not depict their heroes with a thoroughness, with an objectivity even in situations of conflict, or in interaction with members of the receiving society, as do the seminal works of the few authors who we talked about earlier. Apologetic and inbred, self defensive and self-glorifying, with its painful futility and infelicitous tone, their legacy fails to provide a complex many sided view or objectivity. What these writings lack is the initiated outsider's insight into the most essential features, trends and systems of relations. The writings which we named earlier and which tower above the mass currently under discussion offer this insight in such a way that their strict creative form also reflects the author's empathy and compassion.

Empathy and compassion combined with merciless objectivity is opposed to the saccharine superficial solidarity literature of the 'religious press' which is ruled by schematic features journalism, and which offers sympathy but no objectivity and no complexity. This too has to be added after the compulsory memento.

*

After the period of terror the works in question mainly treated Jewishness as a memory, the requisite of an irrevocably bygone past. The proud self respecting part of the community left the country in the autumn of 1956 at the latest, and in the best case continued its existence on the peripheries of the Hungarian linguistic body. Those who remained, the remainder, were silenced by the dictatorship and prevented from saying they would have wished to add in this respect. Four decades were almost enough to silence them entirely.

Authentic Jewishness is conspicuous by its absence in the Hungarian-Jewish literature of the period after the Second World War. Although there have been and still are models, there has not been one religious hero in the fiction of this country in the last half a century, not one subtle psychological description, one deciphered metalanguage, not one attempt to describe a way of thinking that has tried to bring the word from this world.

Speaking of this question in the present tense we find an increasing hollowness in intellectual content, a persecuted self-image, a feeling of escape regardless of the presence

or absence of persecution and an inability to live in organic harmony with this identity. True, the hard times, the life of the pariah, the long shadow of trauma resulted in such unignorable oeuvres as Imre Kertész', in poetry Ágnes Gergely's, Magda Székely's and András Mezei's. Jewish life and thinking of the post-holocaust period were reflected in, among others, György Dalos', György Konrád's and Mihály Kornis' books, but still this imbalance is disturbing. There has only been one great work which, approaching the theme of decline from a distance, embedding it in an appropriate background, raising it to the level of a life philosophy and, in the *how* as well as the *what*, depicted it with astounding and elevating dramatic quality and this is Péter Nádas' "The End of a Family Novel". There are a few other important novels however, which approach the complex conglomerate of questions in a one-dimensional fashion, and there is György G. Kardos's trilogy of singular vision and unique importance. But the achievement of this last as a Hungarian-Jewish novel is secondary compared to its relevance to the Israel of his time. The rest is silence.

Even what could have been did not become subject matter: the relics of the Jewish remnant communities of Eastern Europe did not become integrated into works of literature, this slowly disappearing world of the last half a century has left hardly any traces; only its end result. The letters of tombstone inscriptions, synagogue carvings, or remnants of prayer books say nothing to the new generations and everything is avoided that could indicate or appear as if they felt a phantom pain about this. In the best case Jewishness turns out to be nothing other to them but a disquieting black hole which however does not encourage intellectual exploration, a closed zone surrounded by anxiety and unadmitted guilt, the *terra incognita* of the soul.

*

There used to be and there still could be a chance for the deserving and the daring to submerge themselves and absorb something of this world which will sink into complete oblivion soon after the end of this millennium. What follows after might serve for the regeneration of the community and might still carry the past in its unconscious resonances but it will not bear an organic relationship to it. On account of the lost link, in the next one and a half to two decades, Hungarian-Jewish continuity will sink into its grave. Where the organic continuation of the vaguely emerging literature of the first third of this century should be there is now a gaping space which cannot be filled in. None the less, we should rescue what we can and pull ourselves out of oblivion by our own bootstraps. What we need is self demonstration so that all those who know hardly anything about Jewish life should see what there is to see. We need to mediate like interpreters between this waning culture which is never to be resurrected in the form here described and its potential heirs. To be a Hungarian-Jewish writer today must also mean fulfilling this interpreters function. Loyalty to the literature and loyalty to the civilisation whose sleep, we hope, is only that of a Sleeping Beauty.

2.

Six decades ago, András Komor gave a three-part lecture on a similar theme and in a similar tone, entitled Jewish Problems in Modern Hungarian Literature, at the Open University of the Pest Jewish Community, in the Goldmark hall. The text deals with a partial problem, two works written under the blackening skies of the mid to late 1930's: Károly Pap's *Jewish Wounds and Sins*, Béla Tábor's *The Two Ways of Jews*, as well as several occasional articles and the thorough and broad-ranging essays by the young Aladár Komlós. Yet these lectures present the most important Jewish intellectual dilemmas of

the age, and these have survived perennially ever since. Perhaps the emphases are different from those of the current text but the direction is the same and many of the statements apply with surprising accuracy to our own time.

Jewishness is a topic surrounded by silence and falsification, which does not figure, or only figures in distorted forms in the works of authors of Jewish origin. They do not present their real essence, only the features characteristic of themselves, 'Hungarian writers do everything to avoid Jewishness', says Komor about the 'main trend' of the beginning of the century. In the agitated, anti-Semitic atmosphere of the years after the First World War no answer emerged. What Komor called for, ie. that 'Jewish writers should in some form or other declare their own opinion' did not happen. But no matter how hard they tried to avoid the matter, the matter did not avoid them, it remained forcefully present in their everyday reality.

The 'new Jewish literature' which was emerging in the twenties 'dared to touch upon the topical problems of Jewish people more truthfully and with a clearer approach'. This minority self-criticism is at the same time a social criticism on behalf of the bourgeoisie. They pronounce a severe but affectionate and responsible criticism of the Jewish community on its way to assimilation and embourgeoisement.

'The Jews do not like these writers. They do not read them willingly, just as one does not like that sour face which, looking in the mirror in the morning shows one to be unshaven and old. These writers are annoying in the same way in which it is annoying to have the truth spelled out to our face.'

'A Jewish writer should never deny his Jewishness. He should never try to appear non-Jewish. Which does not mean that he should limit his subject matter to Jewishness. He can write about anything but always in such a way that if his Jewishness happens to be asking for expression even in a single sentence, in one adjective then he should not deny his Jewishness that outlet. And if he was born to see the world through Jewish eyes then he should not try to wear spectacles made for different eyes.'

Komor's basic question is, even today, waiting to be answered and will be waiting as long as Jewishness and literature fail to strike a balance in the life of these authors. 'But the Jewish writer's mission is not fulfilled by depicting the Jewish environment, Jewish life. No, it is not, and even less so as this would mean a limitation and, like all others limitations, would go against the basic principle of authorial freedom... It is not in this that I see the true mission of the Jewish writer. But in providing an expression of the Jewish idea.

Now, it sounds very good to say, the expression of Jewish idea. Perhaps I could even say what I mean by this Jewish idea; nothing other than what our priests preach: to remain faithful to the legacy of the ancestors, to the laws, customs and commandments. Surely, it would be most beautiful if this commandment of the Jewish idea could be adhered to literally.'

In the following section Komor excuses himself and other transgressors of 'the physical regulations' of the tradition (keeping Sabbath etc.) with reference to modernity, diasporic existence and economic necessity. Then he goes on to say, 'But we writers feel excused from these regulations so long as we can say to ourselves that we have fulfilled the law in its intellectual and spiritual implications.' Humanitarianism, fraternity, liberalism, democratic spirit, internationalism, the respect for reason, intellectuality, the will to continue human culture - these are the elements he posits as parts of this spirit, emphasising that his approach is tailored to Hungarian conditions.

Back to Jewishness; Komor announces the direction and the aim but he leaves unclear the how and the how far. He concludes that we need 'the ethical commandments of the Jewish idea', the programme of 'live and write as a Jew' if we wish to see an end to

the schism between Hungarians and Jews, and if we wish to see the latter occupy their rightful place in Hungarian culture .

*

Segregation and the consequent universalism. Do not marry strangers, do not cook the lamb in its mother's milk, divide the holy from the everyday, the clean from the unclean, be strictly different - and identical with yourself, separate and keep separate, choose so that you may be chosen but your separation as part of the chosen nation should shift into a universal salvation when the sheep is to graze with the lion. This is the Jewish paradox. This is that stimulating world view which emerges from the traditional texts. Behind its all-encompassing, hair-splitting system of regulations Primo Levi claimed to hear the self-ironic laugh of the sages who made the law. He was wrong.

The mode of thinking inherent in the model is far from being characterised by humour. It was the necessity of survival that sealed this potentially hermetic system of prohibitions and commandments apostrophised as religious laws so unbreakably tight. Yet it always kept the freedom of interpretation in the dialogue of commentary attached to the main text in the undisturbable frames of the main theses. The assumption of trying to make easy for consumption that which is hard to digest characterises not its object so much as the secularised intellectual.

*

Artistic truth and the norms of religious law do not necessarily coincide in modern works of literature. The deliberate, black and white moral view of the latter cannot be held as a measure to the text which is built out of that which is. Writers depict and confront and their attitude can only indirectly mediate moral values even if it is a lack, an absence that is represented. Through the device of catharsis our sympathy and pity go to them who fall but through their destiny they also suggests to us, who, too, are fallible: 'Change your life!'

The desire to mend the world, to glue together its broken truth is known in Jewish tradition as *tikkun olam*. When András Komor talks of fulfilling the commandments 'in their spiritual implications', then beside his self-justification he is also trying to justify this detour. To resolve that paradox of artistic freedom and religious truth which a Jewish author suffers from. Instead of (the letter of) the law he only considers the spirit of the law worth keeping even though the spirit of this law includes the norm of literal adherence. It demands the body as well as the spirit, practice as well as principles. The name and that which is named make up one whole between them. And if only one aleph is lost from the four Hebrew letters of *truth* what we are left with means only: *death*.

*

Those who hold the integrity of the work important but also respect the tradition and look on themselves in spite of the creative sovereignty as members of the community become caught in a conflict. In psychology the coexistence of incompatible contents in consciousness is called cognitive dissonance, which the mind can only process with a degree of self-deception.

There is no doubt that Komor touched on the most difficult questions with a healthy instinct but it is also undeniable that he falls short of fulfilling the task he set for himself.

It is an understandable expectation that between the creative author and the absolute there should be no other authority. Nothing and no one should be able to limit the sovereignty of the author or the autonomy of the work. Nothing should chain the author down when facing the blank sheet of paper, neither collective expectations, nor the network of religious laws. What the author has to say cannot be subjugated to either of these even though the background community in our case often confronts the person who is depicting it.

In a writer the will to freedom is understandable. For a Jewish writer living in diaspora the main obstacle is not so much the disapproval, resistance or, in the worst case the exclusive rejection of their environment but the deep experience of dilemmas that emerge more keenly as a consequence of their situation, their personality, their mutually limiting, rival commitments.

At first sight, the absolute boundary of their activity coincides with the boundary of public morality based on the tradition. To restore a disturbed order in the world is a moral act. But a literature aiming at a direct justification of commandments or a display of moral fables is poor literature. And in the time of modernism, moreover, post-modernism, in the age of deconstruction, the work does not necessarily suggest a moral truth or health or any unease at the lack of a solid order. It does not restore anything but rather it talks about disintegration, dissolution, or simply considers the whole of this framework irrelevant and its attention is only occasionally devoted to an emblematic signalling of this absence. But after a while textual literature becomes exhausted, empty, comes to an end, because when the subject of representation is itself or its medium, i.e. language, this contemplation of the navel gives a cramp to the neck. This then could be the *caesura* which puts a limit to the Jewish literature and those who cultivate it because in this literature the subject matter is still man, even if the stylistic devices have been touched and influenced by post-modernism.

How could this gap be bridged? How could the writer justify to himself of herself that approach which is most painful to those to whom and about whom it is written, for whom it is primarily produced? How will the writer break their own chains so that it becomes possible simply to concentrate on the subject matter and to create the conditions for producing literature that is good and true even when measured with a universal standard?

The prophet's role model is given, acting against the outdated spirit of the times. In declining periods of civilisation, and it is indubitable that the current diasporic Jewry also bears marks of this, it is justified to speak out against smug public morality since it fails to fulfil its role, as it is lenient toward hollow forms. The prophet can paint an annihilating parable. He can accuse, criticise with open severity, he can practise devastating irony and sarcasm; positive thinking is no longer compulsory for him. He can destroy without even offering to put anything new in the place of that which he has destroyed. But today the role of the prophet and the knower of the law should merge. They should appear together, facing the indifference that the majority of existing Jewry show toward their own essence.

*

This is certainly a conservative view of literature, not from the point of view of style but of the functional role of literature. In the totality of works it sees the (self)-portrait of a community and in its continuity and this means more than documentation: through its reflection it also shapes the features of the original. It is conservative in the same way in which the Jewish life style and mode of thinking also assumes a basic stance of protective loyalty to the tradition.

A traditionalist communal view and responsibility, the representation of typical existential dilemmas, an emphatic sociographic background, severe social criticism but also a protective anxiety. If all these features are present at the same time, it is no exaggeration to talk of a *ruralistic national literature* (in the Hungarian sense). It does not matter whether the majority of these people are today urban citizens and cosmopolitans, usually affluent middle class, self-supporting, liberal, individualistic agnostics and aspiring assimilants and thus want nothing to do with ruralism, or if they are ghetto-dwelling deeply religious, unworldly, introverts who reject everything that is other than the (supposedly) holy scriptures, and rejects modern or fictional literature for this reason.

For the first set it is unpleasant that although they would like to merge and camouflage, their very attitude of hiding can turn them into subject matter and they will be forced to face those features in themselves which inevitably yield collectivity. For the second group contemporary depiction and tone are irrelevant if not blasphemous. The first group read it and find it outrageous, the second, even if they read it, would remain untouched by this literature. The former are not even interested in the past, the latter care for nothing else. We have gone through everything that could be gone through and we possess written memoranda of it all. It is verging on the impossible even to understand, comprehend, or to appropriate the past and its textual remains and what follows can only be tautology - thus the rejection by the latter group. Anyone who the act of literary creation commits partly to expression and publicity and partly to novelty is helplessly caught between these two extremes. The former are shocked that he reminds them that want to forget and the environment from whom, too, they expect forgetfulness, while the latter do not in the least believe in progressive revelation, in the continuity of the Revealed Truth, in the possibility that in our days text can be created which might add something, in its own peculiar way, to the canonised texts.

But authors are in pursuit of the new, it is in creative expression that they find the meaning of their lives. Their activity is a vanity of vanities when looked at from the point of view of tradition. Their work is an idol, a creation by a creation, *chutzpah*, blasphemous: the vainglorious apotheosis of the creator, transgression, scandal, sin. The law says, they are a created part of something, their existence a link in space and time, complete in itself, in its imperfection, in its fallible humility, destined for no more than to become a life's work, part of a community, to survive as one of the depositories of a horizontal and vertical continuity.

Literary creation definitely goes against this expectation. Not merely because it lifts man out of the passing moment and makes a creator of him, but also because it frees him from the chain, elevates him from actor to a reflecting contemplator who subsequently finds it difficult to abandon this new position. Even if later he sees himself as a part of this chain, his viewpoint is inevitably enhanced, his opinions are generated by a new set of points of view.

The writer steps out of the line (and of himself) and looks back with narrowed eyes. And of course sees everything differently than before. Only a most profound commitment can permit and oblige him to express himself in this context. For let us admit: the paradox condensed in his situation is irresolvable.

*

To be in and out at the same time. To respect and practice the tradition, to follow it until it begins to act as a restriction in the freedom of thought and speech that is necessary for creative existence. To respect it even then, but speak out openly against it prohibition concerning creative work, to ignore the behaviour norms and taboos that seep down from religious spirit and practice to everyday thinking because the *is*

designates a wider field than the *ought*, and literature is manifestly about the former while the latter usually just lurks behind the text or serves as a reminder through its absence. This is a profound conflict: the religious law designates an ideal state while creativity must reckon with the fallibility of the existing one. Rooted in the depth of the past, the prescribed order, the optimum of behaviour promises a part in the world to come, while through its narration the art work tries to gain an understanding of the present and the way that leads to it. The former needs humility and trust, the latter, however, needs humility but also self-confidence.

To remain part of the community but to detach oneself as a creative individual from all prejudices, inhibitions and conventions and to show individual and community as they really are. To continue the story, the great narrative which is alive and is at the same time a fixing power. Can we really say that we have gone through everything that can be gone through?

In an ideal case art-works can be said to have causes while Jewishness has an aim. To choose and to be chosen are characteristic of both. But freedom and commitment are mixed in different proportions in the two. One must balance between them without self-deception, beyond the minimum that is necessary for an untarnished existence one should not use the commitment to the one for excusing shortcomings with regard to the other.

*

No text must suffer because of the anxiety that makes the hand which writes tremble. The creation of the artistic imagination must not be damaged. Its aesthetic truth must never be doubted because the ghetto recognises itself in the mixture of reality and fiction. We are the ghetto, we live in it and it lives in us, and even if we have opened its gates and become integrated in the majority society, there is no shame in admitting: we exist through it.

It is possible to circumscribe a Jewish life knowledge and experience, but it is not possible to admit this without a sacrifice. Our literature destroys our idealised portrait of ourselves - this, too, is an idol - but through this it can help us gain a more disciplined and subtle self-image.

*

In the name of *achavat Israel* - the love of Israel - the ethos of the community must not eliminate individuality and criticism. It was the moral crutch of the unsupported, never clearly defined principle that Hannah Arendt rejected in her discussion with Gershom Scholem about the Eichmann trial. Is this a debate of urban versus rural, cosmopolitan versus national? It is, if you like, and both parties are right to some degree. We must not expect confessions from each of them. But if necessary, it must be: I love it *therefore* I criticise it.

Would anyone argue with the encyclopaedic inventory of sophisticatedly complex failings described with exemplary objectivity in the Tanach?

Innumerable cases of possessiveness, jealousy, fraud, hatred and violence, the total catalogue of human frailty is paraded in the scrolls. And do we need sources any clearer than the collections of laws and the commentaries? The text shows a mirror of moderate scepticism to its present and future reader: this is it, this is what we are like. In that place and at that time there was no taboo on speech, no *cherem* for the speaker, no writer's cramp as to what a Jew should or should not say about Jews and there was no dilemma: what will the audience think of all this?

Do not praise evil but show it. In order to change, first I must grow ashamed of my failings, must be made aware of my errors. In order to blush I must first understand them. And if I do not realise them by myself, or if I do not obey the benevolent word of warning, then throw it in my face when I do something wrong. Shame me, write about me as I am.

Is it paradoxical to assume these sentences? Certainly, it is. Who could, who would be so foolish as to utter them of his own accord? And who does not know in the bottom of his soul, that he should utter them?

*

A nation that carries the message of thousands of years of persecution in its common consciousness which it passes on, through inevitable distortion, from generation to generation is likely to assume a victim's self-image and to become lenient towards itself. It only expects a cure for its wounds, it becomes lazy, forgetting the obligational side of the original testament, no longer wanting even to be the chosen people. Instead of a mission they want redress in this world for the wrong they have suffered in this world. As the walls of the ghetto fall down, the people break out and as they have always been ostracised for *what* they are, now they want to know *who* they are, they want to be somebody. They want to prove themselves, to their people and the world. They hoard and make safe but with good reason because they are still frightened but know that sometimes money can buy life. Then in shame, and later in ignorance and in the resulting indifference the bondage falls from their memory, and they become willing to forget the past and their own essence.

Even if their eyes are not blinded by all-obscuring scales and even if they stop in this mad haste and become aware of the typical shortcomings that history has bred in them, of those reflexes which are becoming mass personality marks, even so they believe that periodically repeated threats makes it unnecessary or even sinful to make self-critical utterances as this could encourage and support accusations from the outside world. With their taboos and mainly with the taboo that affects talking about these taboos they enhance the problem by covering it up. By virtue of this consideration they increase, as a matter of fact, they crown their contradictory features, they stigmatise themselves and even those approaching them with empathy will recoil from their stiffness.

*

The evocative depiction of a mass that bears characteristic features even in its heterogeneity cannot do without a certain social critical angle and this inevitably creates a clash of interests between artistic creation and its object. Even though the reader knows that they have shortcomings, they are scared by their distorted mirror image, they feel fear and antagonism if they receive from one of their own people a representation that hitherto only came from exaggerated and evil-intended degrading campaigners and one that threatens to awaken their latent self-hate by the core of truth that they inevitably sense. Seeing dreadfully faithful details they lose all sense of reality. They smell danger and cry traitor. But in fact this picture is far from being identical with that one, the entirety is about something totally different and even if *they* over there happen to read it, in itself it is insufficient to be used as murderous ideology. While the latter can be used deliberately to inflame hatred and mockery, the former tries to be the bitter pill of medicine needed for recovery.

*

A desanctified shrine is better demolished than used in its spoilt state. In its place a new one can and should be built at a later stage. At the moment the demolition is on the agenda, so that later we can build or, to put it more gently, some demolition is needed in order to be able to lay new foundations in place of the rubble that will be cleared away. We need to get rid of the worst of idols: we need to exorcise from our deepest souls the remnants of our own glorified self-image, our intact perfection, the remains of our martyr consciousness, so that we can become inheritors to that unselfishness that Béla Tábor talks about with such sublime humility in the pages of *The Two Ways of the Jews*.

The view of literature which assumes a (Jewish) literature ultimately didactic in its intent and would like to build it upon the central values of the tradition is a conservative view but it believes that the tone and the mode of representation need to be modern and radical in order to represent and map out as comprehensively as possible all the acute, perennial conflicts of the problematic. Need I remark that this, too, is a paradox?

*

When a Jewish writer writes or speaks or makes a public appearance, he must be aware that by his words the whole of the Jewish community is being judged.

A Jewish writer must compulsorily overcome the inhibition that follows from the fact that when he writes or speaks or makes a public appearance, by his words the whole of the Jewish community is being judged or at least his words are contrasted with the whole of the existing Jewry. He must not select his words or turn the way of his thoughts run with this in mind. He must achieve a first person narrative, relinquishing nothing of his Jewishness but shedding the entire Superego of self-censorship according to the points of view of this Jewishness.

To live in a community, to practice *mitzvot*, to believe in and act for the survival of the legacy but at the same time to distance oneself from the paralysing chains of thought all the way to objectivity, to detach oneself from the suffocating expectations and concentrate on the core of the present, to present faithfully the visible and the invisible that is hiding in the mosaic stones of details, which can only be seen from the totality of the work that is wiser than the author, to present and confront with painful severity.

The resolution is scorched with a double seal of dual commitments. The loyalty of the individual to the ideals of the disintegrating community and of the writer to reality. Of the no backing down and of the not letting go. Thus it becomes possible to forge a virtue out of trouble, the permanent existential state of paradox as a source of a continual creative dilemma becomes elevated to an *ars poetica*.

3.

Hungarian intellectual life, in agreement with 'international norms', is in a state of negation. The existence of modern secular Jewish literature is universally negated by Jewish and non Jewish writers and theoreticians. The trend of self assimilation manifests itself here too. Even writers who in their private life carry a positive identity and even take occasional part in Jewish public affairs, betray the feeling that it is an insult to their literary activity if it is adorned by the adjective 'Jewish.' To be a Jewish writer is not an attractive role and they are even reluctant to have their works characterised as such. Owing to its partly benevolent and misguided liberal recipient attitude, and fearing the possible accusation of anti-semitism, but even sometimes even driven by national pride, non Jewish literary criticism is unwilling to form subsystems on the basis of shared identifying marks which go beyond language. This is in spite of the fact that if a text

belongs to a subsystem that does not prevent it from being a member of the larger system also. Still, if somebody publicly and repeatedly appears in conjunction with Jewish subject matter, first they become subject to whispers on the agora of the polis of literary life, critical life begins to gossip about them, and finally, sub rosa, they become hemmed in, categorised, and stigmatised. Even this is of course, a self contradiction yet it is not a figment of the authorial imagination. Its reality is created by a distorted public consciousness.

The over-politicised atmosphere in which the ‘rule of fidgety fears’* is still often felt, does not provide an easy chance for clarification. The question itself regards more than pure literary art and teleological creative work. There are a number of works which provide give away signs precisely because of the intention to hide or through the unconscious resonances of a psyche influenced by its surroundings. Those who are frightened try to escape, those who are trying to escape are sublimating their anxieties.

*

Several writers who are Jewish by origin protest against such categorisation because they believe, in fact mistakenly, that Jewishness as a national identity and as a world view with one root but a number of branches can be negated. The term Jewish is in their eyes a term of privation which bars them from universal relevance. Their negative self image is a compound of the person subject to persecution, of the survivor, and of the potential victim. Perhaps in secret they even see themselves through anti-semitic spectacles, interiorising the distorted images of Jews which are common currency.

We are looking at a psychological wall which was erected from two sides and fixed with the mortar of the last half century. Schematic critical practises and the readiness to classify cause fastidiously individualistic writers to evade or even rigidly reject any labels whatsoever. They understandably fear that the adjective becomes an indelible stigma which can later be abused. Their later works might be viewed against the background of their earlier opuses and confessions, he always writes the same thing, has only one topic, go the dismissive whispers of imagined or real voices. If such a writer diverts from their original topic they are blamed again, it being said that they should stick to their subject. They should only write about what they understand, what they have already found to be proven ground. In the history of Hungarian literature there have been examples of this latter expectation with the outright intent of creating a ghetto, with an excluding and ‘race protecting’ intention, as opposed to the criticisms which we mentioned in the introduction, and which in the twenties and thirties of this century welcomed works with a Jewish subject and encouraged the authors to expand and deepen their knowledge of this unique area.

Exclusion and stigmatisation might frighten off those who waver. It encourages attitudes of camouflage and it counteracts the natural state in which all writers excavate the innermost stratum of their personality, from the deep layers of their consciousness, and allow the densest of their existential experience to come to the surface.

*

It would be desirable if a Jewish writer wrote about Jewish themes on the basis of the experiences they undergo, hopefully with a deeper knowledge and with a functioning complexity of the experiential world, differently from the practice we find today in the literature of the Hungarian language. But for this it would be necessary for them to know

* Attila József, ‘Hazám’ (Homeland)(Translator’s note).

the community, perhaps even, *horribile dictu*, live inside it, in order to have a view of its cross-section and to gain the courage to unveil its frailties - 'Sinners are we, like all the other peoples' (Miklós Radnóti) - and to maintain the courage to carry on living in it. As we have said earlier: to demolish and build at the same time.

*

If it is true that from a higher point of view the writer is writing one work all his or her life, running the world through the filtering system of their personality, then in the case of a Jewish writer even those works which are not strictly speaking about Jewishness voice a particular dialect of existence to those who interpret according to the Gadamerian interpretative principle, uniquely characteristic of the author and their background. And in this case love and dying, shoelaces and constipation, careless laughter and broken sobbing, the savoring of a meal or the smelling of a flower speak as confessions: this is how a Jew loves, this is how a Jew dies or ties his shoelaces or struggles with his constipation, is glad or sad, this is how a Jew eats a meal or smells a flower. This is a transcontextual surplus but at the same time an ultimate boundary. It assumes that though the work speaks to everybody, it still has an undercurrent which carries a metalinguistic surplus only accessible to those that share the same hinterland. It is not that they understand more of it but that to them it is self-evident. Even if, to quote a piquant source, 'They don't know it, they just do it'.

This, however, is not the Jewish writer's problem. The Jewish writer is busy struggling with the paradoxes. And also with the problem of how to carry over into practice all that has been sketched out in this text. How to present in a valid and up-to-date tone the world in which an ancient law presents the inhabitant of post-modernism with as weighty a moral dilemma as it did to those who lived two and a half thousand years ago, the citizens of the diaspora of those days, except that today it adds to these all of the doubts and new truths of the time that passed since then.

The answer is uncertain. But some time you should listen to the violin and the clarinet, the 'hovering rhythms' of pain and mockery, mourning for the dead death and boundless joy, the readiness to leap, the attendant contemplation and the way in which the two merge into each other in a change of tone and tempo so that millennia of prayer and the jazz from the end of this millennium assume a timeless expressive power and then we can give the name 'klesmer literature' to that which can express all this with the power of the written word.

*

Loyalty, freedom, respect for the tradition and radical objectivity, commitment to the part but only to the whole. Who cares for all this and who has ever cared? Marginal problems, we could say. They were just as unimportant sixty years ago, except to a few committed uncommitted people. The literature determined by this way of thinking has had very few writers, and there are hardly any today. The discussion of this paradox has meant little to most people but its real tension is generated by the fact that it proliferates even when no more than one intellect is writhing in its grip.

In the Jerusalem Temple the *cohen* was allowed once a year, on the day of *Yom haKippurim* to utter the Unutterable Name before he entered the Holy of Holies.

The Jewish writer's task is none other but to know what the law of the religion orders, that according to the tradition he who utters the Name is struck dead except on the above named occasion. Thus the writer must guard his sanctity to the end and to strive for nothing else but to try again and again to utter the Name.

András Komor touched on the centre of the paradox with a healthy instance but he offered no therapy for it. We, today, can do nothing other than go on refining and continuing his suppositions. His memory inspires us to apply all our strength to the question. As did Sisyphus against the rock, or Jacob against the angel.

Translated by Orsolya Frank
